A SIGN THAT MEANS LOVE
COMMUNION MEDITATION - FIRST IN LENT
JOHN 13:1-9
MARCH 11, 1973

More than we are usually aware of, you and I depend on signs in order to communicate with others, in order to affirm our own identity, and in order to express feelings and emotions which lose something when limited by our vocabulary. Signs, in the form of symbolic objects or ritualized behavior are vital to us.

In a very important book on the History of Religions, Mircea Eliade observes that: "...symbolism plays a decisive part in the religious history of humanity; it is through symbols that the world becomes transparent, is able to show the transcendent".

There are signs or symbols that communicate the same thing to everyone. A skull and cross bones on a bottle label indicates to everyone that the contents are poisonous. Simple bodily gestures such as a frown or smile or a wave of the hand are ordinarily understood in the same manner by anyone who perceives them. Although recent studies of "body language" have suggested that we communicate more about ourselves than we intend by our gestures and postures. Cultural conditioning also determines the content of symbolic or ritualized behavior. Diplomats representing our nation in foreign cultures have to learn that a smile isn't perceived in the same manner in the orient as it is in the West. And I was interested to read that the administration's efforts to strengthen our relationship with India almost went down the drain because our new Ambassador handed a piece of paper to the wrong person as he was presenting his credentials.

There are symbols and rituals that have very personal and intimate meaning, not shared by others. There are two documents hanging on the wall of my study: they stand for two academic degrees and they tell anyone who sees them only that I completed the course of study at two institutions of learning. But to me - they have an altogether different set of meanings: they symbolize - for me - personal experiences; friends, professors, hard work, joy and heart break.

You and I can look at a bunch of daisies and our shared perception is one of pretty flowers. But I'm going to be perceiving something more than that: daises are a symbol - for me - because my bride carried a bunch down the aisle at our wedding.

And, of course, all of us have established ritualized, symbolic behavior in our most

intimate relationships with our spouses, children and dearest friends. When we try to describe those rituals objectively they sound either meaningless or silly to others. But between those who share their intent, they become powerful and eloquent methods of communication.

Pursuing it just a bit further, those commonly accepted symbols and rituals can have an altogether different meaning to different individuals when they bring their own personal experiences to them. For instance, the American Flag - a very common symbol - obviously means one thing to a returning Prisoner of War; and an altogether different thing to a young man living in Canada becasue his conscience would not permit him to participate in either the war or the system of conscription which powered the war.

My concern this morning - and my reason for briefly exploring the subject of symbols - is that the Sacrament of HOly Communion is a symbolic ritual that employs symbolic objects. As in the case with the flag, the Sacrament enjoys a certain degree of shared perception. But as in the case with my daisies, or that little ritual you play out with your children every night and which is far too personal for you to describe, the Sacrament also is perceived in different and personal ways by every individual who participates in it. I bring to it my experiences and feelings and you bring yours. I bring memories of celebrating it with my family and my little brother sneaking the last sip out of my father's cup; I bring memories of the Sacrament shared by the graduating seniors of my class, all of whom had been hired by nice middle class suburban churches except Jimmy Sawyer who was black and to whom I served the bread and wine; I bring memories of the first time I presided over the Sacrament one week after I was ordained in a tiny, rural Pennsylvania congregation that did not have a minister, of losing my place, and of being gently chided by a crusty old Elder afterward who told me that Presbyterian ministers never walked in front of the communion table - thus interposing themselves between the people and the elements like a priest. I bring memories of serving my own children the elements here last September, of one of them saying "thank you" when I handed the bread, and of another back in the pew allowing as how it "really did taste like blood."

All of us bring personal experience to the Lord's table. And I'm coming to understand that the content we bring is every bit as important as the shared understanding which we've read or been taught. We know what it's supposed to mean; and what I'm saying is that when

it doesn't mean that for us: when personal, intimate memories and experiences crowd out the theological content - it's alright: in fact, it may be more of what the Sacrament was intended to do in the first place.

The Directory for Worship, part of the constitution of the United Presbyterian Church - USA describes the different theological possibilities. The Sacrament is "The Lord's Supper - the Breaking of Bread - The communion - The Eucharist or Thanksgiving". It is a memorial, an act of remembrance, a means of grace, a channel of God's love, an act of penitence contrition, devotion or joy. But there, the Directory for Worship says, with great wisdom: "Let no one presume that words can exhaust the meaning of the Sacrament but let each one search in the light of God's word for such further truth as God may be pleased to reveal to him."

It occured to me, that we might be helped in our celebration of communion on this First Sunday of Lent to try to understand - those experiences and memories the disciples of ourLord must have brought to the holy meal every time they observed it after he had died. It occured to me that this ritualized behavior and these symbolic objects might become a little more intimate if we could see for a moment what they saw, and feel what they felt.

And it occured to me that whenever they sat down at table and broke bread one of them must have said: "Remember how he washed our feet that night!" Consider the emotional impact of [redacted] that act. We have no way of knowing what they were feeling as they sat down around the table in the Upper Rooom. We can speculate that the tension of the week prior was beginning to show. They had come into the city on the first day of the week waving palm branches and were met by a crowd. But the situation had steadily deteriorated every day since. Surely they knew that SOME VERY powerful men were planning a way to get rid of him. Surely they came to the table with the uneasy sense that this just might be the last meal they would share. Surely there were lost dreams and broken hearts and even anger at that table. But whatever they were feeling someone forgot to perform a very common and normal ritual. It was customary for a host at a dinner to provide a basin of cool water and a towel and to wash the dust from his guest's feet, or to have a servant do it. It was the norm -not the exception- and we speculate that it was their practice to take turns performing that ritual.

But someone had forgotten or neglected to do it. So it was that Jesus himself - in the midst of that heavy atmosphere - full of tension and anxiety - got up, took the basin and towel, and - one by one - washed the feet of each of his disciples.

Everyone of them, regardless of what they had on their minds, would have thogght: "He shouldn't be doing this: we ought to be taking care of him." And when he knelt before Peter and began to wash the feet of this strong, spirited man, Peter - always the one to speak what others only thought - said, "No Lord - I can't let you do that." And Jesus replied: "Peter, you don't understand the full significance of what I am doing - but some day you will."

Consider the impact of what he did. It was an acting out of the whole meaning of his life: it was a visual demonstration of what it means to love and to accept other people as they are: it was a powerful affirmation of each one of them as persons. I am sure that whenever they broke bread together, someone said, "Remember how he washed our feet." and that in remembering they experienced his love all over again. I don't think they spent much time discussing the intracicies of sacramental theology: but I would guess that the remembered experience of him washing their feet became a sacramental reality for them as long as they lived.

In Godspell, a musical dramatization of the Gospel according to MAtthew, each character develops throughout the play: a prostitute, a serious gentleman, a silly young girl, a big time operator, a flippant jokester. When they sit in a circle for the last supper, Jesus passes cleansing cream to each one the and they wipe the make-up from their faces. There is no more pretending, no more clowning, no more play acting. And then Jesus goes around the circle touching each one and in a gesture reminding each one of who she or he was when first met by him. Then he gives each a warm and vigorous embrace. Each one is powerfully affirmed as a person and undergirded and loved as part of the ritual of communion.

That's what the Sacrament is. A ritual : ~~stylized~~ symbolic behavior that ~~symbolizes~~ represents something: a sign that means God's love for us. Part of that meaning we share: and part of it we have sensed in experience & too personal to mean anything to anyone else.

So let us commune this morning: open to the memories these symbols evoke: open to the love of God which they represent. - and which is appropriated to each of us ~~in~~ differently, intimately, personally, ~~Amen~~ whenever we commune together. Through J.C. our Lord Amen

Father, we are grateful for the Sacrament and what it has meant to your people down through the centuries. We are grateful for the meanings it has for us. But most of all we are thanful for the love which it expresses.

Amen